

Web browsers

Internet Explorer has long been the leading web browser, but is it the best? Ben Pitt puts four popular browsers to the test

Everyone needs a web browser, but how many of us take the time to choose the best one for us?

After all, Internet Explorer comes preinstalled with Windows and it seems to work pretty well.

As the leading browsers mature, they are tending to become very similar. All are free and offer a similar set of core features. If you want to switch from Internet Explorer, all its competitors will import its Favorites, homepage and other settings. When considering what distinguishes them, the devil is in the detail. Subtle design flourishes can greatly speed up everyday tasks, and minor flaws can be a constant irritation. Some also

offer various extra features; Firefox leads the way with its third-party Extensions.

Another issue is how well a browser displays pages. This depends not only on the technical capabilities of the browser but also on how web programmers accommodate specific browsers' limitations. Internet Explorer lags behind in its support for emerging web standards. Because of its popularity, web designers are forced to submit to its quirks, often at the expense of compatibility with other browsers. Hopefully, the improvements in Internet Explorer 8 (currently in beta) will allow for a more level playing field in future.

Specialist knowledge Alternatives to the big four

The browsers here are the four most popular, but there are plenty of others to choose from. Many are based on the Gecko engine used by Firefox.

Flock (www.flock.com) is essentially Firefox with additional features for integration with Web 2.0 services such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Picasa, Gmail and various others. It saves users' log-in information, and photos and videos from these sites appear in a Media Bar that runs along the top of the screen. Blogging and webmail tools are integrated, too.



▲ Flock puts social-networking sites at the heart of its interface

Flock's interface works better than Facebook's own for simple activities, but you'll need to use the website in the normal way for more involved tasks such as writing on walls.

Other specialist browsers include SpaceTime (www.spacetime.com) and uBrowser (<http://ubrowser.com>), which present webpages in a virtual 3D environment in a bid to make it easier to search and sort multiple pages.

There are over 100 other browsers available. See <http://tinyurl.com/eed8b> for a full list.

MICROSOFT Internet Explorer 7



Free

From www.microsoft.com/ie7

Internet Explorer is by far the most popular web browser, but we don't often hear people singing its praises. However, there is plenty to like in this latest version. With its features and ease of use, it has finally caught up with the competition.

Its use of tabbed windows is the best here. A second tab is always ready and waiting – Firefox and Safari users have to go to the File menu or type Ctrl-T – and a Quick Tabs button shows thumbnails of all your open tabs. RSS feeds are handled elegantly, with filtering of stories by text search or date. A Search bar accesses various search engines, but searches aren't available by right-clicking a word on a page. Finding a word on a page is clumsy, as the pop-up window partially obscures the page.

Internet Explorer is often criticised for its poor handling of web standards. Sure enough, version 7 makes a hash of the Acid2 test at www.webstandards.org, although the beta of Internet Explorer 8 passed. While IE7's page-rendering flaws are a pain for



▲ Internet Explorer 7's Quick Tabs view helps keep track of multiple open pages

designers, they have little impact on users; its popularity means that nearly every page on the web has been designed to work with it. In fact, Google Maps was quicker and printed more accurately in IE than in the other browsers. Furthermore some websites, such as

those for certain online banks and music download shops, work only with IE. Unfortunately, there are also more security threats designed to exploit its flaws.

Despite IE7's underlying issues, it's the most reliable way to view the web. With a rounded set of core features, it's an excellent choice.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Wide compatibility with websites
- ✓ Superior tabbed browsing
- ✗ Awkward Find facility

WEB BROWSER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 233MHz processor, 128MB RAM

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▲ Safari 3 Beta makes light work of finding text on a page

APPLE Safari 3 Beta

★★★

Free
From www.apple.com/safari

Safari 3 Beta is the first version of Apple's browser available for Windows. It looks very much like its Mac counterpart, with its rounded scroll bars and bulbous drop-down lists. There's some wasted space at the top of the screen that could have been used to display more of a webpage, but the various controls and toolbars are tidy and compact. Text is rendered using anti-aliasing to soften curved lines, but we found that this diminishes legibility. On the upside images are anti-aliased, too, which helps avoid blocky artefacts when they are resized to fit the screen or because of shoddy web design.

Safari isn't short of smart features. The best one is Inline Find, which searches for text on a page, updating as you type and darkening the page so that all the highlighted word matches are clearly identified. We like the Private Browsing mode, which allows anonymous web browsing without having to clear the browsing history afterwards, and also the ability to resize text-entry boxes.

Sadly, this beta release has a few annoying habits that make it frustrating to use. Clicking the Address or Search bar doesn't highlight the existing text, so typing won't delete the previous entry automatically. Triple-clicking is the easiest workaround. The mouse wheel scrolls through pages more slowly than in other browsers. There's no facility to resize pages for printing, and although there are various options for controlling the behaviour of tabs none of them makes pop-up links open automatically in a new tab rather than a new window.

Apple claims Safari is much quicker than its competitors for launching and rendering HTML and JavaScript pages, but this was rarely our experience. It was marginally the fastest to launch but tended to be slower at loading pages, sometimes by a significant margin. Memory usage was the highest of the four browsers.

Safari has some positive attributes, but sadly its weaknesses in this beta release are more noticeable.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Some innovative features
- ✗ Anti-aliased text can be hard to read
- ✗ Various minor usability flaws

WEB BROWSER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 500MHz processor, 256MB RAM. Also available for Mac OS X 10.4.11



▲ Firefox 2 can be expanded via a huge range of utilities and mini-applications

MOZILLA Firefox 2

★★★★★

Free
From www.firefox.com

COMPUTER
SHOPPER
BEST BUY

This open-source browser shares its lineage with Netscape – once the most popular web browser, but recently shelved by its current owners, AOL. However, as Netscape is put out to pasture, Firefox is enjoying great success with a market share of around 15 per cent.

Because it's open source, Firefox benefits from a massive array of add-on features, known as Extensions. One of our favourites is a spellchecker that works directly in text-entry boxes, complete with a custom dictionary, which is perfect for webmail. Others download YouTube videos to your hard disk, preview a page by hovering over a link, display a slideshow of all images on a page or use Gmail as a remote storage device. The list is huge.

Even in its default state, Firefox has the best search facilities here. The Search bar taps into a generous selection of search engines and websites. When Google or Yahoo! is selected, a Suggestions feature auto-completes words based on common searches. Right-clicking on highlighted text on a page gives an option to search for the text using the selected engine, with results appearing in a separate tab. Safari and Opera have similar features, but search results replace the current tab, which isn't as useful. Locating text within a page is just as impressive. Hitting the / key opens a Quick Find bar at the bottom of the screen, and results are shown and updated as soon as you start typing.

Firefox's handling of RSS newsfeeds is different to its competitors'. Headlines appear as drop-down lists, so they are quicker to scan, but there are no filtering options. Still, if you want more sophisticated RSS tools, there are plenty to choose from in the form of Extensions.

Performance was above average across our tests, and memory usage was the lowest by quite a margin. With so many strengths, barely any flaws, and a large market share ensuring widespread compatibility with websites, Firefox 2 is our clear favourite.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent search facilities
- ✓ Hugely expandable via Extensions
- ✓ Fast; low resource demands

WEB BROWSER Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/Vista, 233MHz processor, 64MB RAM (500MHz, 256MB recommended), 50MB disk space. Also available for Mac OS X 10.2.x and Linux kernel 2.2.14



▲ Opera 9.26's Speed Dial feature is a novel take on the Favorite concept

OPERA SOFTWARE Opera 9.26

★★★★★

Free
From www.opera.com

Opera has the smallest market share of the four leading browsers, but you wouldn't guess it from its collection of polished features. New to version 9 are Speed Dial, whereby opening a new tab displays thumbnails of up to nine user-defined webpages, an integrated BitTorrent client and small desktop applications known as widgets (similar to Vista's sidebar gadgets). There's a comprehensive built-in email client. A similar interface is used for RSS newsfeeds to help keep track of read and unread stories.

The Search bar includes a short list of search engines, but search facilities from almost any website can be added with just a couple of clicks. If it's too much hassle to pick the desired search engine from the drop-down list, type into the Address bar with a prefix for the search engine in question – G for Google, Y for Yahoo! and so on. Double-clicking a word or right-clicking a block of text on a page reveals options to search for the text using the default or any other search engine, translate it with AltaVista's Babel Fish or even speak it out loud. Another innovative feature is the ability to switch off a distracting advert.

Opera appears to support emerging web standards well, and passes the Acid2 test at www.webstandards.org. However, we found that it didn't cope as well with certain other webpages. Google Maps behaved awkwardly and slowly, and animated slideshows weren't available in the Picasa photo-sharing site. This probably has more to do with Opera's small market share, which places it lower down on web developers' priorities, than technical problems with the browser itself, but it's still significant. The relatively high memory usage is less forgivable, and we experienced a couple of crashes during tests, although the crash recovery feature quickly restored all our open tabs.

There's plenty here to tempt people away from Internet Explorer, but in our experience Opera 9.26 is not quite as robust.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Packed with innovative features
- ✓ Excellent search facilities
- ✗ Problems rendering some pages

WEB BROWSER Requires Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP/Vista, Pentium II processor, 64MB RAM, 50MB disk space. Also available for Mac OS X 10.3 and Linux with Standard C++ Library